BEACON 23

COMPANY

HUGH HOWEY

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

Annotation

Out here on the edge of sector eight, I can be alone with my thoughts.

Sometimes, this isn't a good thing.

- Beacon 23
  - • 1 •
  - • 2 •
  - • 3 •
  - • 4 •
  - • 5 •
  - • 6 •
  - • 7 •
  - • 8 •
  - • 9 •

Beacon 23
PART 4: COMPANY
by Hugh Howey

• 1 •

A billion stars in the night sky—and one of them is winking at me.

Except this flashing light is not a star. A hundred or so klicks away, it belongs to what looks like another beacon, similar to mine. It appeared a month ago when a tug came out of hyperspace and parked it there. I wasn't sure if it was going to stay or move on—sometimes these commercial tugs use my remote bit of space as a waystation. But this morning, the beacon went operational. It seems I have a neighbor.

I pinged NASA on the QT, but all they'll say is that the cargo wreck a few months back signaled the need for some *redundancies*. It reminds me of an intersection in my hometown in Tennessee that got by just fine with stop signs until a chicken truck plowed into that young couple. Our first stoplight went up a few weeks later. That stoplight blinked yellow all night, in deference to the quiet, and the adults about town discussed with grave voices what this unwanted intrusion might mean.

A hundred klicks away, a light blinks at me. I know what it means. It's a cold reminder of my failure. Of wreckage spilled and lives lost. If stop signs could feel shame, I imagine that one in my hometown felt something like this. Standing there, frozen, watching in horror as that young couple got killed, feathers and dead chickens everywhere, all that squawking, until weeks later someone in an orange vest pulls that sign out of the ground and strings up the newfangled.

My warthen nuzzles against me, probably because of these guilt-laden thoughts. Her name is Cricket. She's like a cross between a Labrador and a leopard, with moods just as wild as those two extremes. There was a time when she wanted to kill me, but now she just follows me around like a puppy. I'm pretty sure warthens are empaths, that they pick up on moods and even some thoughts. When the bounty hunter who owned her died, she glommed onto me. That's probably not a good thing, with thoughts as dark as mine.

I'd love to know more about these creatures, but there's scant information in the archives, and I can't exactly send off a research request to Houston. Here's how *that* conversation would go:

> Station Operator: "Sir, could you come here for a minute? I've got… well, let's just say it's an unusual re-rec from 23."
>
> Chief of Ops: "Lemme see. Hmm. Wants to know about warthens, eh? Hey, isn't this the guy with the pet rock?"

SO: “Yessir. Same guy. I’ve also got this completely unrelated issue with his beacon. I mean, I’m sure these two things have absolutely nothing to do with one another, nothing whatsoever, but O2 consumption has gone up fifty percent throughout his beacon, and our boy is going through food packs twice as fast as usual.”

CO: “And now he wants a feeding and care guide for a large alien quadruped known to be in the employ of bounty hunters?”

SO: “That’s right, sir.”

CO: “Didn’t this guy have a run-in with some bounty hunters recently?”

SO: “I believe so, sir. He’s had quite a shift.”

CO: “Any chance the O_2 and food pack problem started right around the same time as the bounty hunter thingy?”

SO: “You know, sir, now that you mention it, I do believe both issues started around the same time. Same day, in fact.”

CO: “I see.”

SO: “…”

CO: “…”

SO: “…”

CO: “Yeah, I got nothing either. Send him whatever he wants.”

Okay, that last bit is wishful thinking. And yeah, I have conversations like these in my head a lot. But at least I don’t have them out loud anymore. Not as much, anyway.

Cricket rubs her nose against my arm, and I lift it so she can tuck her head against me. I point at the blinking light. “There,” I tell her. “Do you see it? What do you make of that?”

The two of us watch as the black of space swallows the light, spits it out, then swallows it again. I stare at the beacon, mesmerized. Cricket paws at her reflection.

So many questions. Is someone over there? Another operator? I’ve tried the HF twice, with no response. And NASA doesn’t like us to use the QT for non-emergencies, so I haven’t been pestering Houston every five seconds like I want to. Instead, I’ve been up here in the GWB, watching this solitary light flash on and off. I’ve been watching it for hours. How in the world did I pass the time before this intrusion into my routine? When the stars were all fixed, time slid by unnoticed. But now there’s a metronome out there, tick-tick-ticking the day ever so slowly away.

The thought of ticking reminds me to check the time. It’s 2228

local. There's an army troop transport, bound for the front lines, due to pass through soon. A ship full of guns and the men and women to fire them. Rows and rows of heroes. I remember wearing my fatigues and boarding commercial ships to get back to my company from R&R, how people would thank me and pat me on the back and how good it felt to board a plane before first class. Respect. Only because they had no idea what I did out there. If they did, they would've been clutching their children, not sending them over to thank me.

I also remember catching the eye of the few conscientious objectors in the terminal, the people opposed to the war but afraid to speak up. There was no hate in their eyes, only pity. Sadness. Knowledge that I might be necessary, but that we shouldn't be *proud* that I was necessary. That's how I saw myself and my company by the end of my second tour. I didn't hate what we did so much as hate the need for it all. No one should applaud this. We should bow our heads not in thanks but in sadness.

Above the main observation porthole there's a picture of an old lighthouse keeper. I give him a nod, this colleague from a different era. Then I stick my head into the chute leading to the beacon proper. The Gravity Wave Broadcaster that allows ships to pass through my asteroid field has to be kept away from all the other systems, and so a long tube of weightlessness joins the two compartments. With a single pull from the edge of the tube, I launch myself down.

Or across.

Or up.

Direction loses meaning for the few seconds it takes to reach gravity on the other side. I twist in the air, pull my feet under me, bend my legs, fall through into the command module, and land in a crouch—precisely the type of hotshot maneuver the labcoats warned me never to try. Which gave me the idea in the first place.

I get out of the way quickly before Cricket lands right where I was standing. She shakes her head and grunts. Still hates the vertigo, but hates being away from me even more. Hates it enough that she's learned how to scramble up and down the ladders, and even figured out how to paw her way through the weightless chute.

I have to admit, having her around is nice. That's probably why I hid her up in the GWB when the navy came to haul off the bounty hunter's ship and the bounty hunter's lifeless corpse. After they left, I found her acting loopy up there, which must mean the GWB messes with her head just like it does mine. For all I know, it's worse for her. She can pick up on thoughts, or pheromones, or *something*. Maybe her brain is just more sensitive. All I know is that NASA still has me on quarantine, and here I am taking in aliens.

Like I said, I'm not very good at this job.

The debris across the asteroid belt attests to that.

Makes me wonder if NASA's putting this new beacon in not for mechanical backup but for *personnel* redundancy. Maybe my being a great big war hero makes it difficult for them to recall me. Maybe they hope this'll be my outpost for life, somewhere out of the way. Maybe this beacon is my pension plan. My forced retirement. Where they put heroes who have nothing left to give.

Cricket growls at me for thinking these things, and I force away the shadowy thoughts. That's the good thing about having a warthen around. It's why I've stopped thinking about jumping out the airlock with no helmet on. The last time I sat in front of the airlock door and keyed in the first three digits of the override code was the day I adopted this strange creature. The next time I even *thought* about going down there, Cricket acted like she was going to maul me. Paced around the ladder hissing and growling and swiping at me if I approached her. Maybe this is the ideal remedy for depression: a gun that can read your mind and is forever pointed at your head. Gives you some good practice in bottling up those dark wishes.

Of course, bottling shit up doesn't fix what's ailing you at the core. But I've given up on the idea that anything can fix what ails me.

I check the scanners and readouts across the command dash, then glance at the time again. The troop transport is due. I wait, standing at attention. My old company is on this ship, some of the brothers and sisters I bled with, the few who are still alive, still serving, still have all their limbs. As soon as I see the faint ripple across the grav scanner, I salute them. The ones I let down. The ones I betrayed. And all the ones who can't be on that ship anymore.

I told Scarlett, an old war fling of mine, the truth of my heroism right before she died. Right before she died here on this beacon. I told her that I could've taken out a hive of alien buggers with the press of a button. I could've killed a trillion of them. The blast would've taken out me and two companies of troopers as well, but companies have died for far less. I might've turned the tide in sector six. Eight planets have fallen since then, and the war is pushing through sector seven and heading this way right now. The Ryph are on the offensive.

But for one day, we saw them in retreat. The day I won my medal. The day I did nothing. All I did was wimp out when I could've killed all those unborn monsters. It just seemed to me, in that moment, that the hive was full of little buggers who hadn't done anything wrong yet.

Guess I'm not very good at the big picture stuff. I can barely maintain this little tin can that's become my world. I'm nothing more than a washed-up soldier from a small town in a backwoods corner of an old planet. And now I'm just a beacon operator.

Just not a very good one.

• 2 •

Cricket whines and turns in circles, and at first I think it's from me being hard on myself, but I've never seen her act quite like this. I notice as she turns that she keeps glancing at one of the portholes. Maybe she can feel the troop transport passing by, that carrier filled to the brim with dark thoughts. I go to the porthole and peer out, craning my neck to look down the length of the asteroid field.

At first I don't notice it. It's not until the long flashes come that I realize the beacon isn't so much winking anymore as palpitating. Dot-dot-dot. Dash-dash-dash. Dot-dot-dot.

S.O.S.

Cricket mews.

"I see it," I tell her.

I grab the HF and key the mic. "Unknown beacon operator, this is Beacon 23, is everything okay over there? Over."

I wait. The QT is still showing the last message from NASA. I key in: *SOS w neighbr*, then hit "Send," "Confirm," and "Yes I'm goddamn sure."

I wait.

I watch the light.

Two or three seconds go by.

I could pace in circles and wait for NASA to tell me to check it out, but you don't need orders when there's a distress call in space. I served in the navy before I was forced groundside. If anyone hails for help, you help them. None of us could survive out here without a system like this in place.

So by the time my operator in Houston is seeing my message and setting down his coffee and wiping his ridiculous mustache, my feet are already hitting the living module deck one level down, my palms burning from the fast slide. The next ladder drops me into the life support module, then one more ladder takes me to the lock collars. I grab my walk suit and helmet from their hangers and dash inside the lifeboat. Before I can key the door closed, Cricket bounds down from the module above, landing on the grating like a large cat.

"Stay," I tell her, holding out my palm. "Stay."

Cricket tilts her head and cries. She takes a step toward the lifeboat.

"No," I say. "You stay."

Normally she does whatever I ask, or whatever I really concentrate on her doing. But this is one need she seems to always put before mine: the need to follow me. Before I can give her another order, or lock her out, she dashes through the open airlock door,

brushing against my leg, nearly knocking me over. By the time I get the airlock secured and get up to the cockpit, she's sitting in the navigator's seat, peering through the canopy like she knows we're going somewhere, like she's done this a thousand times. Or maybe like she knows what happens next.

•••

I wiggle into my walksuit while the autopilot steers us toward the beacon. The throttle is at max, which ain't much in this bucket. And maybe now's a good time to admit that I haven't been in a very good state lately. But this is progress, I think, to realize I'm going a bit mad. The dangerous phase is when that's happening and you can't see it. When you *think* you're sane, so the crazy is all invisible. As a reminder of my propensity to lose my grip on reality, I wear a rock on a lanyard around my neck. For a time there, I thought the rock was talking to me. I'm getting better, I swear.

Glancing over at Cricket, another thought occurs. What if I'm overstating the whole mind-reading thing? What if I'm making up a pattern of when she nuzzles me and when she doesn't? And here's the truly fun part about going a little crazy: even the obviously sane things you do can be called into question. Is that beacon in front of me real? Did Scarlett really come back into my life, tell me I could help her win the war, and then disappear again? There's a faint stain on the deck by lock collar Charlie, and I can't tell if it's rust or her blood.

I reach over and pet the warthen. There's no doubting this, at least. This is real. And the beacon ahead of me looks pretty damn real. I leave the thrust at full to close the distance, and my mind drifts back to my army days. I can feel the wake of the troop ship that passed through, all those boys and girls heading for the front to be dumped into a trench. I feel the recoil of my rifle as it takes a life. Geysers of soil explode into the air and fill our nostrils. There's the metallic odor of blood as soldiers with hope cry for a medic, soldiers without hope cry for their mommas, and soldiers with guns bring tears to the other side.

I wonder what Scarlett meant by us ending this war. Wars like this don't end until one side is ground to dust. It's crazy to me that naïve people like Scarlett even exist, that they can live in this galaxy, see what we all see, and cling to foolish notions like they do. And yet there are legions of them. Protestors. Picketers. Alien-lovers. Conscientious objectors. Traitors.

Yeah, I'm a traitor. But I'm the worst kind. I don't believe like the rest of them do. I just got tired of it all. I couldn't fight anymore. You

fight because your squad needs you to. When the last man standing beside you goes down, you don't need a bullet to take out your knees; the depression does that for you. I've seen the biggest troopers felled by the heavy darkness. I've watched them curl up in the mud and just stop moving. I remember hoping that'd never be me. And here I am.

There's a number on the side of the beacon. I can read the large blocky digits as I close to within a couple klicks: 1529.

Damn.

When I see that number, I don't think of how many beacons there are out there. I don't do the dollar math and think of the poor taxpayers. I don't get all cosmic and think of how big this galaxy is and how much we're spreading out into it. No, I think of how many people are out there, living alone like me.

Too many.

Approaching within a klick of the beacon, which is still flashing its SOS, I can't see anything obviously wrong with it. There's no atmosphere jetting from an impact hit. No orange glow across any of the portholes from a fire inside. In fact, the beacon is obscenely pristine. There's not a char mark on her. Just unblemished, beautiful steel painted NASA white with neat rows of rivets and gleaming solar panels that probably run at 100% efficiency compared to my beacon's 48%.

But my beacon isn't the one with the distress signal. Closing to within a hundred meters, I grab the stick and turn the lifeboat sideways while still carrying all that forward momentum. It's a crazy maneuver in a bucket like this. No idea if the side thrusters can even halt my current velocity. I put them on full and eyeball the distance to the lock collar, guiding the approach until I bang into the beacon and hook the magnet with a three out of ten on the pilot-o-meter.

Cricket growls at me like she thinks I'm being generous.

Throwing off my restraints, I leave my seat and hurry to the airlock. As I key open the lifeboat's inner airlock door, I see the red light flashing above the control panel. There's no atmosphere handshake from the other side. Something is very wrong with this beacon. Closing my helmet, I shut the lifeboat's airlock behind me, keeping Cricket at bay, and then key in the universal override code. I've got a bad feeling as the door to this beacon opens. And even through my helmet and the thick airlock doors, I can hear Cricket howling with fury on the other side—pissed that I'm leaving her, perhaps. Or just knowing that I'm a fool to go.

• 3 •

The lock module is empty. Bare. The hatch to the other lifeboat is open, so I check inside. If there was a loss of atmo, this is where any survivors would go. But this beacon has a lifeless feel. Sterile. Like a vacuum. Any hope of finding someone over here vanishes. The neighbor's Maserati just has its hazards going off. I glance at my O2 levels in the suit and head for the ladder, knowing NASA would at least want me to turn off the emergency signal and investigate. One flight up is the life support and mechanical module. My boots clang on the rungs, the sound muffled by my helmet.

The mechanical module might as well have shrink-wrap on it. Everything gleams. There are no loose wires dangling from all the add-ons and repairs cobbled together over the years. No oil streaks running down the pumps from worn-out seals. No blistered and peeling paint. No rust or signs of age. She's like a shaved-head recruit standing there, holding her neatly folded fatigues, not a scar on her smooth flesh. Gazing at the room around me, all I can think of is the grief to come. All I can see are the bolts whizzing like bullets in the cosmos around us. All I want to do is throw myself over her grav generator and shield it with my body, keeping everything safe, not letting a damn thing touch her—

There's a bang somewhere above me. Distant. Muffled. Like the debris heard me and reached out and slapped this nubile recruit. Like our drill sergeant caught me smiling at her. I grab the ladder leading up to the living quarters and clomp up the rungs. More newness here. I touch the sleep sack. Wish I could pop my helmet open and see what they smell like out of the factory, before dozens of people have slept in them.

Another bang, nearer now. This one startles me, because even through the suit, I can feel that the bang is *inside* the beacon, not against the hull. That's when I notice the duffel bag in the galley. Personal effects. Through the porthole, I can see the *dash, dash, dash* of an open-mouth O as the light outside continues to flash in alarm.

I grab the next ladder and climb up into the command module. I'm not alone. Two legs jut out from under the command dash, sheathed in white NASA sweatpants. Two bare feet. Ten toes splayed upward. Unmoving. Like a body pulled halfway out of a morgue drawer. The upper half of the person is concealed. I think of what it would be like to die like this, asphyxiating, choking on empty, burning lungs. I've thought about that a lot.

I approach the body. *This one's not your fault*, I tell myself. I couldn't have gotten here any quicker. I need to pull the body out to

inspect it and determine the cause of death. Reaching down, I grab one of the ankles, and the body spasms. Kicks. There's a shout and a bang. More kicking at me, legs scrambling like they're riding a bicycle, and then hands gripping the edge of the dash, a face appearing, loose strands of hair over wide eyes and an angry mouth. The muffled sound of someone shouting at me: "What the fuck?!"

•••

We stare at one another. It's a woman. Her lips are moving. She has no helmet on, which makes mine feel silly. I reach to open the visor, and there's only a slight twinge of fear that maybe she's an apparition, and maybe I'm not in a beacon at all but out in the cold vacuum of space, and I kinda hope that this is true—

But I breathe atmo when I pop the visor. And I hear the end of her last sentence:

"—the hell'd *you* come from?"

She waits for an answer. This is an easy one. I got this one.

"Beacon 23," I say.

We stare some more. This is awkward.

"I'm— I saw the distress. Are you— Is everything okay?"

"I was just fine until you scared the ever-living shit out of me." The woman brushes some of the loose hair off her face. She's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. Some distant part of me knows that this is because I've been alone for a long time, and because the last person I loved recently died in my arms, and because I'm just glad this person isn't dead, but there's another part of me that thinks she really might be that gorgeous.

"What's going on?" I ask.

"What's going on? I'll tell you what's going on, those idiots in Texas've built near on two thousand of these buckets, and they still can't send them out without all these glitches. Can't one of these things boot up and work the first time? Is that too much to ask? It must be too much to ask. Hand me that spanner."

There's an open toolkit on the deck, just under the dash. I hand her the spanner, and she ducks back out of sight. My walksuit feels bulky. I shrug under the weight of it all. I feel like taking off my helmet.

"So they sent you out here to operate this thing, and it doesn't even work?" I ask.

"They never work," she tells me. "Not at first." Her voice is a bit muffled by the cavity she's working in, and a bit by my helmet. "And I'm not an operator." She peers out at me from the gloom. "Do I look

like an operator to you?"

She looks like a normal person to me. Does that mean "no"? Does that mean I don't look normal? I guess I don't. I decide to leave my helmet on. I've got a week's worth of growth on my chin, and my hair is a shaggy mop that wouldn't pass muster in the army or at NASA.

"I guess not," I say.

"I'm a tuner," she says. "I get these things working so your lot can survive in them. But right now, I'm trying to get all the sensors that're telling this bucket everything's wrong to understand that everything's not wrong. She's all haywire."

"A tuner," I say. It's the first I've heard of them. Sounds like something a piano needs, not a trillion-dollar piece of astral navigation machinery.

The woman leans out of the cavity again, sitting up. Her hair is matted down in places with perspiration. Most of it is in a ponytail. Light brown, with a hint of red. And emerald eyes. I'm an unblinking fool. And the walksuit is damn hot.

"Yes, a tuner," she repeats. "Pass me that bolt, please?"

I break my stare and look where she's pointing. There are small bolts that I recognize, the ones that hold the control consoles to the main panel. I hand her the bolt, but only after slipping one of the lock washers on it. She narrows her eyes at me like she just watched a monkey perform a trick. "I'm Claire." She holds out her hand, which is streaked with grease. I shake it. "What d'you go by?"

I laugh. Nerves, I guess. "Lately, I go by *That Idiot*. In the army, they just called me Soldier. But back in flight school, we were given call signs."

She laughs. "What was your call sign?"

"It wasn't a very good one," I warn.

"Lay it on me. Another bolt, please."

I prep and hand her another bolt. "My call sign was Digger."

Claire's laugh echoes from within the cavity. I shift in place while she works.

"It was supposed to be Tomb Digger," I explain. "Which is… you know… really badass. But my flight instructor didn't like me, and he saw me rub my nose one time, and said I was a nose digger, and that from then on I'd just go by Digger. So that was it." I shrug, even though she's not looking.

"Tell the truth," she calls out. "You were picking your nose, right? Not just scratching it. Give me the lock nuts."

Her hand emerges. I place the three lock nuts in her palm. "I may have been picking it," I say. "I'm not proud."

"No, you're not. I can tell that about you."

I can't determine if this is a compliment or not. It definitely

doesn't *feel* like a compliment.

"So where'd you serve, soldier?"

"All over. Orion. Humbolt. Dakka. Did my first tour on Gturn."

Claire whistles. "They always had you in the shit, didn't they?"

"Hip deep."

She wiggles free from the space, and I move back to give her room. She has on a white NASA tank top. No bra. A trim and muscular physique. Not what I expect in an egghead. She starts working on one of the main consoles, and I watch, following what she's doing. Looks like a master reboot sequence, but she's rewriting the config.sys before it goes through, coding faster than I can type.

"Let's see if this works," she mutters.

The lights go off around us. Pitch black. There's a distant *thunk* from the massive power relays two floors below. Pinpricks of light make themselves known through several of the portholes as my eyes gradually adjust. There's something sensual about this, exhaling and inhaling in that dark space with someone else. I can feel her presence like I have radar. I can tell that there's another person in the darkness with me, that I'm not alone. I stand frozen, afraid to move my limbs, afraid of what I might do with them.

The lights come back on. Claire is staring intently at one of the portholes. I look as well. The pulsing, fluttering, palpitating, unsure lights of the shocked and alarmed have returned to that steady metronome, that constant and confident pulse.

Claire smiles at me.

"Much better," she says.

I agree.

• 4 •

Cricket pounces on me as I enter the lifeboat. She holds me against the deck, massive paws on my chest, and growls and growls. Clamping down on my arm with her mouth, she squeezes like she wants to bite me. But she just holds me there, making threatening noises in her throat.

I let her have it out and scratch her neck. Relenting, she lets go, mews at me, then licks my face through my open visor.

"I know, I know," I tell her, stroking her head, trying to calm her down. "I'm sorry. Everything's okay. I'm sorry."

I exude these thoughts. Cricket lowers her weight against me, as if we're going to lie just outside the airlock and take a nap.

"Up," I say. "We gotta go. Can't abandon our station. Everything's okay here."

Better than okay. But I can't stay. After an hour of watching Claire work, sweating in my walksuit, feeling useless and awkward, I had to beg my leave. Despite every craving in every cell of my body, I had to beg my leave.

Cricket and I head back to our beacon at half-thrust. I leave one of the displays set to the rear camera, and I watch the unblemished and new recede as I crawl across empty space toward my rundown home. Cricket is passed out on the seat beside me, her body sprawled over the armrest so that her head can reach my arm, pinning it to my seat with the weight of her exhaustion. Must've worn herself out pacing and fretting while I was gone. When I need to adjust the throttle, I lean across and use my left hand so I don't disturb her. What the hell am I doing? Aiding and abetting a fugitive, and now harboring an alien. This is what happens when they give you medals for breaking the rules—you forget the rules apply to you.

Opening the airlock to my home, I smell the tiredness of the place. The clean atmo in the other beacon cleared my nostrils, and now I can smell that the air I live in isn't foul so much as stale. The scrubbers are doing their job more admirably than I thought. Hell, they're doing their job more admirably than *I* am.

Shedding the walksuit, I head toward the ladder. Cricket seems to read my mind and leaps for it first. She wraps her paws around a rung halfway up, lunges again, and grabs the lip. Elbows jut down as she scrambles, rear legs wheeling, tail corkscrewing. Every time she goes up a ladder, it looks like she might not make it, but she always does. I'm already climbing up behind her, the air cool on my sweaty skin, just my sleep shorts on. Cricket takes advantage of my hands being occupied at the top of the ladder and gets in a lick on my head and

one on my cheek before I can ward her away.

"No lick," I tell her, wiping my cheek. I've tried to train this out of her. "Never lick me again," I say, shaking a finger at her. She sits and cocks her head to the side. "Last time. Never again. No licking. I mean it."

Her tail swishes the steel grating. I pat her head. I swear she can read my mind, and yet somehow she doesn't seem to hear a word I say. I scratch behind her ears and ask, "These are just for decoration, aren't they?"

She licks my hand. I don't know why I even try.

Up another ladder, I start the shower pod. I let it steam up inside, the water recycling over and over. When it looks like one of those cig smoking rooms in a spaceport, I crack the door and step through the fog and into the scalding hot. The death and tiredness boils off my skin. I scrub the old cells away, getting at the new me beneath. Soap and lather. I fumble for my razor and run it under the shower head before rolling it across my face. Little patches of hair elude me. I wash my hair, then turn my back to the jet and just let the heat pound into my spine. Water so damn hot. I pee while standing there, remembering Hank from B Company who used to get angry when anyone did this. One whiff of pee in the showers, and Hank'd go ballistic, looking everywhere for the yellow stream. We'd accuse him of using this as an excuse to go around studying our dicks.

Hank was my best friend in the company—for all of the two weeks he was alive with us in the trenches. It was a long two weeks. There aren't any rules about how long you gotta know someone to know you love them. The army taught me that. You can hate the moment you line up your barrel, and you can love the second you lower it. Back and forth like that. Oscillating grav panels. There's no up or down to the cosmos, just a whole bunch of fucking sideways. Just people loving and hating. And no rules on how long it takes.

I turn off the shower as the heat starts to die down from boiling to mere scalding. My flesh is red. Steam rises off me as I leave the pod. Cricket is fast asleep on my bed; she wakes long enough to glance at me, make sure she isn't missing anything, then goes back to sleep.

I rifle through my clothes, sniffing everything. All the same degree of mildly clean. It's only now that I see the amber light flashing over my bunk. Damn. Message on the QT. I go up the ladder two rungs at a time and check the display. Three messages from NASA asking me to report back in about the SOS.

I key in the number *55*. Then I press through three screens of warnings before the entangled particles tickle their entangled twins back in Houston. Five by five is what someone used to say back in some other time to mean that everything is okay. Not sure why this is

any more efficient than just saying OK. It probably has something to do with the state of Oklahoma. All their fault. Just like it's Germany's fault we have to say the number nine as "niner." Everyone causes trouble. It's not just me.

I turn the message alarm off and walk a big circle around the command module. Then another circle. Cricket wakes up below, realizes I'm gone, and arrives at the command module with two leaps, a grunt, and some kicking. She curls up on the blanket I leave under the dash for her and watches me pace.

I shake my arms like they're still wet, like there's something in them I need to get out, like those nerves a soldier feels before a big push out of the trenches. What the hell is wrong with me? A trickle of water runs down my breastbone, leaking from the porous rock I wear around my neck. I wipe this away, cross to the porthole, and watch the flashing light for a while. I turn to the HF, wondering what I would say if I picked it up. I turn back to the light.

This is worse than being completely alone.

• 5 •

I dream of my company that night. My old company. B Company.

Bravo, boys.

Take a bow.

Clap Company.

The kind of clap you don't want to receive.

They cured that shit centuries ago, but they still called us the VD crew. Very Desperate. Veterans Disabled. Vaginas & Dicks. Vapor Dust. But my favorite: Verily Dead.

You need one company set aside for the glory runs and photo-ops. That's not us. That would be the Alpha Company boys and girls. They think they're the shit, because they get the milk runs. Might *seem* like they get the worst targets, the toughest assignments, but they're the targets with all the intel, the battles we know we can win. A good chess player doesn't send out the queen unless he knows she's gonna take a couple pawns and not take a nick. So the top scorers, the squeaky clean, the square-cut jaws, the Aces and Champs, they get sent out with the best gear and the best air support and the best artillery crews and the biggest budgets, and they always get their buggers.

Charlie Company is for those you barely trust with a gun. The swinging barrels in a crowded dropship that have you ducking so fast you throw your back out.

That leaves Bravo Company, the expendables who know what they're doing. When you've gotta hit something, and you don't know its soft spot, you clap twice for Company B.

SIR YES SIR! SIR, MOTHERFUCKING RIGHT, SIR! SIR, AIM ME AND FIRE, SIR!

We think on our boots in Company B. We fight our way, bewildered, through the confusion and the haze. We don't make it out the other side, not all of us. But somewhere, there's the click of a pen, a proud signature, a father's hand on a young man's shoulder, and we reload. That's the sound of our collective gun cocking, the click of that pen. That's us racking another round in the chamber. Fire that boy out, hope you hit something. If he gets three before he goes home in his own bag, then the numbers look good. That father gets his medal. No one else to wear it. Goes in a frame above the mantel, and on holidays glasses are raised. First you raise the kids, and then you raise a toast.

I see it all in my dreams; I see it every night. The shrapnel seems to come from the earth. When the kinetic missiles hit, the ground vomits hot death. An eruption of soil, a cloud of screaming metal

reaching out for the unfortunate, grabbing limbs and lives with abandon.

I see the boys and girls in my dreams. The brothers and sisters. I see the mangled. I see my best friend Hank, who hated when I peed in the shower, and he's standing there with his trousers wet, looking at me, dumbfounded, like he'd shrug at it all if he had the limbs, like the cosmos would be a funny place if that was pee all over him.

"—just need a quick hand."

Yes, we all need a hand. Titanium. Carbon fiber. Neurologically integrated. Five hundred and twelve degrees of hot and cold sensitivity. Better than the real thing. Everyone needs a hand. And a leg. And a new colon. I have half mine. I have a goddamn semicolon. I'm naked in class, and Mrs. Phister is asking me a question about grammar. I pee myself while the kids laugh. There are shower nozzles everywhere, shooting soil and shrapnel into the classroom. Kids laughing and dying. I remember the rule for semicolons; the sentences on both sides have to be full ones. Full people. Whole. Not many of them anymore.

"You listening?"

I'm listening. I'm paying attention. I have no idea what's going on, but I'm paying attention. I take it all in slack-jawed, assuming the guy next to me knows what he's doing. I'll follow him. Someone else is following me.

"Digger? Hello? Soldier, you there?"

I wake up in my sleep sack. There's a squawk of noise from the module above me. Cricket has her head across my chest, is snoring softly. As I blink away the nightmare, she stirs and peers at me from half-lidded eyes. "Shit," I say. "Up. Gotta get up."

I crawl out of the bag, even as Cricket tries to stop me, her head weighing a ton, a paw on my arm. I run naked to the ladder and scramble up, banging my knee and cursing. Snatching the mic, a little breathlessly and a lot desperately, I wheeze, "Yeah— Hello? Hey. I'm here. Wassup?"

I gulp and exhale and suck in a deep breath. Then I remember to add: "Over."

"You okay?" Claire radios back.

"Me? Yeah." Gulps of air. "I'm great. Whatcha need?"

"Shit. I woke you up, didn't I? What's the time here? I'm still on Houston time. Hell, I'm always on Houston time. You wanna check in with me in the morning? Your morning? Over."

I could listen to her babble like this forever. I get ships passing through now and then, get to chat with traders and ore tug captains. They give me sports scores and war updates, which often sound like much the same thing. But this is someone right next door who is

staying there, who goes to sleep and wakes up there. A mere hundred klicks away.

"No, I'm up," I promise her. "How can I help?"

I'll wear my good clothes this time. I rub my face, feeling the smooth skin. Sniff my armpit.

"I need you to give me a full sweep with your gwib. Trying to calibrate this bucket, but there's so much debris here. Can't clear the noise."

Yes, the debris. That would be my fault. I did that. Sorry.

"Yeah, sure," I say, disappointed that it's something I can do from here. "No problem." I go to my dash and power up the GWB for a full pulse. The lights dim a little while the massive capacitors two modules down charge up. I try to picture Claire standing over there, looking at her own console, watching and waiting. I see her in her sweatpants and tank top. Her hair in a ponytail. A few loose strands tucked behind her ear. Reddish hair. The color of rust.

"Whenever you're ready," she says.

When the PULSE OK light goes green, I flip the metal toggle beneath it. There's a sensation of vertigo, like the grav panels beneath my feet are on the fritz, but it's just a wave of whatever makes me feel nice and numb when I rest my head against the GWB. A megadose. The light goes red for a moment and then shuts off altogether. Cricket grunts at me.

"Looks good," Claire radios. *"Muchas gracias. If there was a bar within spittin' distance, I'd buy you a drink."*

I stare at the mic in my hand. I glance over at Cricket, then toward the chute and the business end of my beacon. Knowing I shouldn't, but that I'm gonna anyway, I squeeze the mic.

"I've got something even better," I say.

• 6 •

Claire is waiting for me at the lock collar. The split second the outer door of my lifeboat opens, I realize that she's gonna see me for the first time, without the helmet, with my hair way out of regs, and with my gaunt face.

Whatever she's thinking, she manages a smile. The cramp in my cheeks is a hint for me to not smile back quite so much.

"Beacon warming present," I say, holding out the black plastic bag.

Claire looks at it quizzically, but accepts. There's a length of red wire twisted around the top of the bag. It's the kind of bag our air filters come in. I'm supposed to toss them in the recycler, but Cricket loves batting them around the modules.

"If this is wine, I'm gonna want to know where you got it from," she says.

I watch as she twists the wire off and opens the bag. Reaching inside, she pulls out the can of WD-80.

"You can never have enough," I explain. "And I noticed the circ fan was squeaking a little the last time I was here."

She laughs. "You're sweet." The words hit me like a knee to the gut.

"Yeah, well." I point awkwardly at the can. "It's a good year, too."

"And this is supposed to be better than a beer?" she asks.

"Oh, no, I just wanted to bring you something. The… uh, follow me?"

I step past her, and she closes the airlock behind me. I take the ladder first. The pristine nature of the beacon hits me just as hard this time. The two beacons are like their occupants, I guess. One flawless. The other horribly disfigured.

Up in the command module, I duck my head inside the long tunnel that leads off to the GWB. With a swimming motion from my arms, and a good leap, I launch myself down the chute, spiraling a little so the handholds are above and below me, smooth walls to either side, my fingertips brushing the surface to keep me centered. At the other end, I hit the gravity generated by the floor of the GWB module. I turn and wait for Claire. She's right behind me, gliding through space, upside down, so that her worried frown matches my smile.

She catches herself at the edge of the chute and aligns herself to gravity, then lowers herself like a gunner gets in her tank. The space is tight for two. With Cricket, it's never a worry, as she tries to curl up in

my lap. With Cricket, it's comfortable. Here, it's overtly intimate. I wonder if this is why I brought her here. Then I remember why I brought her here. I move over and sit with my back to the GWB, patting the grating beside me. "Sit," I say. And by habit, it sounds too much like I'm talking to Cricket. "If, you know… you want to."

She settles in beside me.

"I don't know why it does this, but just rest your head back against the dome and relax. You should feel it. Like a sip of whiskey."

We both sit there for a few breaths. Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. The unblinking stars peer in through the porthole.

"Do you feel it?" I ask.

Claire doesn't answer at first.

"Yeah," she whispers. "I… I think so."

We sit like that for what feels like a few minutes. That's an eternity to sit with a stranger in silence. I feel a nice numbness creep into my bones. I feel my mind relaxing, words coming to me, tumbling out between my lips like soldiers from a trench.

"Whadja do before you became a tuner?" I ask. I'm assuming she was an engineer. In maintenance or assembly. One of those egghead roles.

"Same as you," she says, her voice a little quiet and distant. "Army. Two tours."

This tries to register, but doesn't quite. She's too clean for that. Too pure.

"I enlisted after Delphi," she adds.

"Yeah," I say. "I guess a lot of people did. You see any action?"

Claire doesn't answer.

I hate myself as soon as the words leave my lips. Like a general regretting his orders, watching his men run out of the trenches in the wrong direction. If she hasn't seen action, it sounds like I'm judging her. If she has, I'm stirring up memories best left settled in the bottom of her soul.

"I was on Yata for the push," she tells me, her voice quiet. "A Company. Second platoon."

No way, I think to myself. *No fucking way.*

"We were pinned down for three weeks. They were bombing us to oblivion. Then this squad with a death wish pushes into the hive, threatens to blow it all to smithereens, and—" She glances over at me, gives me a long, cold look. "I'm sure you know the rest."

Of course I do. Everyone does. But all I can think is: *Not her.* Even though I know this is no great coincidence. All of A and B companies were there for the push. For the five weeks I was Earthside, after I got out of the VA, I had people coming up and shaking my hand, thanking me, saying I saved them. And when the tears came to their eyes, I'd

nod and tell them it wasn't necessary. Just doing my job. Lie through my teeth. Tell them the same damn story. Over and over until you almost believe it.

"I wouldn't take you for a soldier," I whisper, my voice cracking a little. "You seem too… good for that."

"Yeah," Claire says. "Aren't we all."

•••

"You didn't bring libations, but thanks for the lubrication," she tells me, smiling, as I board the lifeboat. "I'm sure the grease'll come in handy as I get this bucket up and running."

"No problem," I say.

It feels like the close of a date. Like she's walking me to my car. A whiff of distant and forgotten normalcy drifts by. It's like that pocket of warm water that comes out of nowhere when you're swimming in a lake, or that ray of sunshine on a cloudy day, or that smile from that woman behind the counter at the DMV. The unexpected and bright. The startling joy.

"Hey—" she says, as I turn to go.

I turn back. Is she going to kiss me? We're both soldiers, and sex was something that soldiers engaged in as casually as they tore into MREs. Just a thing. I don't want it to ever be a thing like that again.

"Do you need anything?" she asks. Her brow is knitted together. Lines of worry across her face.

"Like what?"

"Well, I've got a few days here—" she jabs her thumb back at her beacon. "—then I'm back to Houston for a bit for a debrief. If there's anything you need over on 23…"

I laugh. "My can needs more than Houston's got," I say. "Besides, their engineers were up here a few months ago. Just made the place worse. Had the grav panels oscillate on me—"

"Shit. Really?"

"Oh, yeah. So don't let them send any help my way. I'm good."

"Okay."

There's something else. Something she wants to ask. Something she's too kind to say.

"Okay," she says again.

And I know that look. That worry. I know what she's wondering. What she wants to say.

If you ever need anyone to talk to…

Like talking ever fixed anything. Like words have that power. I touch the rock around my neck, knowing I've got plenty who'll listen,

but none who understand.

"I'll see ya," I say, turning my back before I make a mess of things.

"Yeah," Claire says, like she knows better.

It's only after the door hisses shut that I pick up on what she said. Back to Houston in a few days. That's all. Just that pocket of warmth in a freezing lake. Just a glancing ray of sunshine. A star that winks once, twice, then turns away. Death without the dying.

• 7 •

By the end of my first tour of duty, I was already an asshole. I told myself I'd never get like that. I remember when I joined my first company, after losing my wings and being put in the trenches, how I'd introduce myself to someone with too many days of service, and they wouldn't take my hand, wouldn't give me a name, would simply tell me to "Fuck off."

I called them the assholes. It's what I muttered to myself as they walked away. I later learned that this exchange wasn't what it seemed. You shake enough hands and meet enough people and lose them all to the war, and you get to where you don't want to meet anyone else. Looking back, I can see how the assholes were quick to give me any advice that might keep me alive, but they didn't say shit about who they were. Names were simply home states or cities or favorite ball teams or embarrassing nicks. The assholes didn't hate you; they just didn't want to get attached. I got like that. I didn't want to ever meet another Hank. I think that's why he remained my best friend throughout my two and a half tours. I never let anyone else get so close. Those two weeks were painful enough. Hell, after Scarlett, I never confused sex and love again. Used to think the two had something to do with one another. But then the sex and dying came so close together that it almost felt like you were doing it with a corpse. Takes the joy out of it. You die a little inside every time you have joyless sex. Neurons prune back. The good in there withers. And some things never grow back.

This is why I spend the next two days staring at the HF, too self-protecting to pick it up, too enamored to just walk away. I don't want to know another thing about her. I can already feel the agony of her leaving, off to another brand-new beacon, asking someone to pass her a bolt, the smell of soap and grease on her skin, bonding with some other soldier, leaving behind a dotted line of finely tuned machines and shattered hearts. Makes me feel sorry not just for myself, but for every other lonely and hapless vet who—

"Hello…?"

Cricket lifts her head from her blanket and stares at the ladder well. What the hell? What the hell?

Looking over at the airlock indicators, I can see that collar Bravo is energized. Who the hell stops over unannounced like this? I step toward the ladder, step back, step toward it again, my arms out and akimbo, while Cricket gets up from her blanket.

Before I can think to stop her, the warthen bounds for the ladder.

"Fuck," I say. I run after her. "Stop! Wait! No!" All the useless

commands come out together in a jumble. I practically jump down the ladder, landing in a roll and grabbing at Cricket before she leaps down another level. I don't stop to put on pants or a shirt, just have my boxers on, and I'm down the next ladder to the life support module when I hear a scream just below me. A shriek. I land to find Claire on her back, Cricket standing with her paws on the tuner's chest, holding her against the grating.

"Off!" I shout, pushing Cricket to the side and ending up on my knees. Cricket tries to get at Claire again—I can't tell if it's to greet her or dominate her—and I fight to hold the alien back. Claire scoots until she's against the air scrubber and pulls her knees up against her chest, is staring at the animal wide-eyed, her jaw hanging open.

"Sorry," I say, sitting down and reaching out toward Claire. "I'm so sorry."

Claire doesn't say anything. I tell Cricket to back off, to go lie down, to take it easy, and finally the tension goes out of her muscles. She paces back and forth on the other side of me, her head tracking Claire. I keep pointing to the grate, telling her to lie down, *thinking* for her to lie down, and she finally does. But with a grunt. Like she'd rather be doing anything else.

"God, I'm so sorry," I say. I reach over and touch Claire's shin, remembering the time I touched her ankle. She startles, but not as bad as the last time.

"What the hell *is* that?" she asks.

"A warthen," I say, breathing hard from the dash down. I rub the ankle I sprained a while back. "I— She sorta adopted me."

"That's—" Claire can't take her eyes off Cricket. She aims a finger at the animal. "That's against regs. That's… You can't have that."

"I know," I say. "I know. I suck at this job. You're gonna can me. I know. We can go QT Houston if you like."

I almost feel relief at this. Lately, I've gone from thinking I'll serve in this bucket for the rest of my life to being pretty sure I could be fired at any moment. This is the route I took when I sided with Scarlett against the bounty hunters. But the only person who knows that is the hunter who dragged Scarlett's body away. And she hasn't said a thing, apparently. But with Cricket around, it's just a matter of time. When they do the food resupply, they'll figure it out. NASA counts every hundred-dollar bolt. They won't miss this. And now they know. The jig is up.

"What the hell is it?" Claire asks. While I'm considering which remote planet I'll retire on, she seems to be coming out of shock. "Canine? Feline?"

"Neither," I say. And I see that the fear is out of her, replaced by curiosity. Here's a soldier who's seen a shelling. Knows when to duck

for cover and when to come out, look around, see who needs help.

I snap for Cricket, who bounds up like a coiled spring, has only been lying there because I yelled at her to. She nearly knocks me over on her way to Claire, gets both paws around her neck, and starts licking her hair.

"Down!" I say.

"Easy," Claire tells the animal.

And I see that Claire can hold her own. She twists to the side and rolls the warthen on her back. Pins her there, which I know from experience isn't easy. Cricket's body is tense, but her legs settle as Claire finds that spot on her belly.

"She likes that," I say.

"Who wouldn't?" Claire asks.

We stare at each other.

This is the last goddamn thing I wanted. The last goddamn thing.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I ask, unable to censor myself, angry at her for being a good person and shoving it in my face like this, waving it around like a flag, making me notice.

"Fuck you," she says, but she keeps rubbing Cricket's stomach. It's just trench talk. Soldier anger, which lasts as long as soldier love does. "You said this bucket was falling apart, I thought I'd come see if I could help. But I think maybe the bucket isn't what's broken."

"The hell does that mean?" I ask.

She looks down at Cricket, whose eyes are closed. She's doing that deep growling thing that I'd call a purr if it wasn't so goddamn unsettling.

"You're right," she says. She pats Cricket, then unfolds her legs and stands to go. "Good luck with everything, soldier."

"Wait," I say. I reach for her hand, even though I don't know her, even though I've spent all of four hours with her, even though I haven't thought of anything else for the last three days. "I'm sorry." Two words that I used to choke on when I was younger, that I only now know the value of, the true worth, and how good they feel to say. "It's just—"

"What?" she asks. She's standing there, my hand around her wrist, looking down at me. Cricket is watching us both.

"It's just that—"

I shake my head.

"You don't want to have feelings for me because you're scared I'm gonna leave?" she asks.

I turn away, because the tears leap up in me so fast that my throat closes and I can't swallow or see. I wipe at my eyes, full of shame.

"Well fuck you, soldier. We all leave. Every one of us. You've

been in the shit. You choose to keep yourself from people who might leave, you choose to keep yourself alone. We all go. Fucking open up to someone. For your own sake."

Cricket's head is in my lap. She's looking up at me. Claire is peering down at me. I'm the rock between two soft spots.

"You think I don't hurt?" Claire asks. She squeezes my hand. Somehow, her hand is now holding mine. "Look at me."

Reluctantly, with tears rolling down my cheeks, I gaze up at her. She's holding up her shirt. A web of scars peeks out above the waistband of her sweatpants—a tangle of lace-like flesh that wraps clear around her hip. I glance from this up to her face and see that she's looking at my own exposed stomach. I look back at her wound. I'm the asshole. I'm the guy who thinks he's uniquely miserable, who thinks all the world's woes are his, who sees the pure in everyone else and the dilapidated within. Only I have suffered. Only I know pain. How do you share what you think no one else can hold? Why do we all do this to ourselves and each other? Why can't we just fucking cry like men?

I do in that moment. Gone is the allure of having sex with this woman. Gone is the allure of loving her and spending the rest of my life with her. Gone are all the good things I dream about. All that's left is the awful, the horrendous, the brutal, and the hurt.

The last bit of egoism I have left in me is to think to myself—as I convulse with sobs and bawl like a child—that no one has ever cried like this. It's the last time I'll ever think I'm unique. The last time. Because as soon as I think that no one has ever cried like this, a woman is wrapping herself around me, a stranger, a sister, a fellow wounded, a lonely lover. And she shows me that I'm not alone. And we cry like the universe is about to end.

• 8 •

There's something oddly familiar about the way she strokes my hair after, the way she looks at me, the way her hair is mussed and her cheeks are flushed. She must be thinking the same thing, because the first thing either of us says in what feels like forever is her asking:

"Was it good for you?"

We both laugh. It's the best kind of laughter. "What the hell *was* that?" I ask. Because nothing happened other than the holding and crying.

"That's called feeling something, soldier. Good to see you can still do it."

There's something scarily clinical about the way she says this. She tucks my hair behind my ear. Definitely not reg length. And I can't stop myself from thinking that maybe she was sent here to tune more than that other beacon. That's paranoia, though. That's remnants of my ego. A billion stars staring at me from across the unfathomable distance, and it's not the cosmos that teaches me how small I am. It's this perfect person lifting her shirt and reminding me that no one's perfect. We all have stories. And regrets. And weaknesses. She pulled off what astronomy couldn't. Or maybe it was just about damn time for me.

"I don't want you to leave," I say.

She nods. "I know."

Cricket growls in her sleep. The warthen passed out as soon as we were done bawling, like it had exhausted her as well. I reckon that, if she's really an empath, it did.

"Are you glad you met me?" Claire asks.

"Of course." There's no hesitation.

"There you go," she says.

I rub her arm. I memorize how she feels for later. I take her free hand and pull it to my lips, kiss the back of her hand, feel her squeeze my hand in assent, then take a deep sniff, trying to memorize how she smells.

"Have you ever done this before?" I ask.

Claire laughs. "Would it matter?"

I shrug.

A moment passes.

"No," she says. "I probably needed this more than you did."

The old me would've privately doubted. The new me isn't so sure. Maybe her path has been harder than mine. Maybe I can let go of the specialness of my suffering. Maybe the handholds I've been clinging to have been digging into my palm and cutting me rather than keeping

me from falling.

"If you ever want to share," I say. "I'm here." Because I can be the shoulder too. I can listen instead of not-talking. I can prop someone else up. Me. The broken one. No: *a* broken one.

I think of Tex, a grizzled vet who served in my last squad, who died the day I won my medal. I always thought Tex was crazy. He was the happiest motherfucker you ever met. And not happy with the zeal of killing, which a few of the really off-kilter vets got, but happy with the joy of being alive that day and wanting to remain that way for one more day. Tex would introduce himself to every goo-green kid who joined the squad, every piece of farm-fresh. He'd put his arm around their shoulder, tell them his life story, his real name, ask them all about their hometowns, so that even those nearby had to learn shit we'd rather not. We'd get hit by these frag grenades of nicety. He took people in, Tex. Got close to them. Cried like a baby when the smoke cleared and the tags were tallied. And I thought he was fucking crazy, going about war like that. Not learning what the rest of us learned.

But he may have been the only sane one. The human out there with all us aliens. Still living. Refusing to give up. Preferring to yo-yo up and down like grav panels on the fritz. Preferring that to the weightlessness. To the lack of gravity.

I want to feel a little numb again. I smile at Claire. "You want to go sit up at the gwib with me? Just for a little bit?"

A frown shatters her beautiful face. She looks sad again, but not the raw sadness of all those wounds in her life—this is sadness mixed with pity. This is her not wanting to tell me some awful truth.

"You know it doesn't do anything, right?" she says.

No. I don't know. I have no idea what she means.

"The gwib. There's no way it interacts with your brain."

"Fuck that," I tell her. "Yes it does. It mellows me out. It's the only thing that does—"

She brushes her hand across my cheek, and I feel something else that mellows me. I was getting worked up just then, but her touch calms me down. I know I'm right, and she's wrong, but I don't need to get upset about it. Just accept.

"You feel calm up there because it's the only place you sit still," she says. "It's where you breathe. Where you let yourself relax. You can do that anywhere. You just have to choose. Just *be.*"

I shake my head. I'm about to argue with her, when she runs her hand down my cheek, down my neck, and touches the rock hanging from its lanyard.

"What's this?"

I place my hand on the back of hers. I think of Scarlett for a moment, how sex and love used to mean the same thing. But this is

love, what I'm feeling right now. The surest I've ever felt it. Romantic or not. Just human to human. Real love.

"A memento," I say.

"What does it remind you of?"

I think about this. So many answers. I want to make sure I choose the honest one.

"That I'm not always right," I finally say. "It reminds me to question myself. Question everything. And never stop."

Claire smiles. She touches my lips with her finger, then leans in and kisses me. When she pulls back, much too soon, she says, "Well, you got that part right. Never question that. Hold on to it."

I pull her against me, not to make love to her, but just to love her. To hold something good and imperfect and fucked up, and to feel someone holding all of that in return.

• 9 •

It's moving day. I watch on the zoomed-in vid screen as the supply shuttle makes its approach toward beacon 1529, little puffs of uncertainty as the pilot tries to line up with the lock collar. On the HF, I hear him proclaim contact and good hold. They must give these back-sector routes to the greenest fliers. I shudder to think my precious Claire is entrusting her life to this noob.

"Gotcha," I hear her radio back. That voice. We spent hours the last few nights chatting via the HF, after having spent hours chatting in person, and saying we should really get back to our own beacons, and then saying we should really get off the radio and get some sleep, and then waking up and making up an excuse to see each other again.

When Claire caught me unplugging the CO2 sensor alarm in her life support module—and I fessed up to three other things I'd broken over there that might be serious enough to keep her around, fixing stuff, but not so serious that anything would happen to her—she got a strange look on her face, like she knew this was going too far, and we were feeling too much, even though we still hadn't had sex, like we were saving that for the people we didn't love quite so truly. Well, it was after this that she QTed NASA and said the beacon was good to go. To send her an operator. At least, I think this was what decided it for her.

Cricket mews and growls and nudges her head against me.

"I know," I say, scratching behind her ears. "I like her too."

The warthen clamps her jaw on my arm and squeezes, like she'll bite me if I don't stop lying.

"Love," I say quickly. "I love her. Okay? But I'm supposed to tell *her* that, not you. So leave me the hell alone about it."

Cricket pulls away and walks a big lap around the command module, whining.

"I'm sorry," I say, throwing my hands up. "Whaddya want from me? Huh? I don't make the rules. I just break them. Can't it be enough that we had a good week? Does it have to be all about today?"

Cricket stares at me. I can hear that I'm asking myself these questions. That it's me angry at the cosmos.

"C'mere," I say, patting my lap.

Fifty kilos of alien jumps up in my lap and finds a way to curl into a dense, furry ball. Her tail swishes along the ground, back and forth.

"Truth is, I'm scared," I tell her. "What if sitting still stops working? Or breathing in and out doesn't do anything anymore? If the gwib doesn't do anything, what if everything else stops working too?"

She licks my hand. And then I have a scary thought, one I shove

away fast before Cricket can pick up on it—and the question is this: What if I were to lose her right now? This animal is the nearest thing I have to the GWB, or Rocky, or Claire, or all the things that have given me peace in the moment but never seem to last. Where's the everlasting peace? Is there even such a thing? Or do we war like alien races war, eternally, against ourselves? I hope that's not right. I hope that's not how it all works.

"Beacon 23, transport KYM731. Requesting permission to dock. Over."

I look back to my screen and see that the supply ship has left its collar. It's just the lifeboat there. There are lights in the portholes and flashing lights along the solar panels. She's all up and running.

"Hop down," I tell Cricket.

She does, and I grab the HF's mic.

"Lock collar Charlie," I say, reaching over to energize the magnetic latch.

I go down the ladder ahead of Cricket and close the ladder's top hatch behind me. I can hear her pacing and mewing, but she doesn't put up a big fight. Maybe she can read my thoughts and knows that if she gets spotted here, I'll lose her, and she'll probably spend the rest of her life in a zoo. Or get bought up by another bounty hunter, who'll use her with his dark thoughts.

The pilot whaps the collar pretty damn good. A one out of ten on the pilot-o-meter. I key open the airlock, and we shake hands and exchange names and pleasantries. Then he passes me two dozen plastic crates full of supplies, spares, and food, and I pass him back two canisters of unrecyclable waste. He gives me two empties in exchange. The entire time, I keep expecting Claire to come give us a hand, or say one last goodbye, or at least wave. But the last time we saw each other, it was too perfect a final goodbye to replace. A lingering kiss that I can still feel on my lips. A warmness in my heart that liquor and grav wave broadcasters could never touch.

"One last thing," the pilot says. He disappears and comes back with a black plastic bag. The top is seized with a red wire. A tear rolls down my cheek, and I don't turn aside, and I don't wipe it away. I don't even feel the pride of someone who does neither. Nor the pride of not feeling this. Instead, I just am. I feel the sweetness of the gift. I feel the sweetness of feeling the sweetness. There's no shame, just a distant awareness that something in me has changed.

"Can never have too much of this," I say.

The pilot is looking at me funny. I untwist the wire and pull out the can of WD-80, then make a show of appraising it. "It's a good year." It's been a good week, at least.

"Yeah, whatever," the pilot says. "The operator just told me to

give that to you. I swear you people are strange."

He turns and heads back through the airlock.

"Tuner," I shout after him. "She's a tuner."

He looks back at me.

"You think she looks like an operator?" I ask.

He shrugs. And then, reaching to key his door shut, he says, "You all look the same to me."

"Wait!" I say. I peer past him into the supply ship, which brings us our food and our spares and the people who replace us, and which takes us home if we ever decide to go. I search for some sign of her, but there is none.

"Yeah?"

I show him the can of lubricant. One quick burst, and things just slide together. "Thank her for me," I say. "Just tell her I appreciate it."

Another look like I'm the crazy one.

"Tell her yourself," he says. "She's your neighbor. I'm outta here."

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It takes me three or four stunned breaths to put it all together. And then I take the three ladders quicker than I ever have. If there were an Olympic event for beacon operators, I would've set the galactic record. It never would've been broken again. That is, until I hit the hatch that leads into the command module.

I free the clamps holding the hatch and give it a shove, but the thing won't budge.

"Cricket!" I yell. "MOVE! Cricket! Off—!" I grunt with effort, climb another rung and put my shoulder to the hatch. I feel it rise a centimeter or two, but then it collapses back down as Cricket shifts her weight.

"I swear, Cricket, get the hell off! I'm trying to get up there. Bad girl! Move!"

Finally I get it lifted enough that she slides off. She jumps out of the way as the hatch falls into its recessed slot in the deck. Then Cricket's all over me as I try to get up the last rungs of the ladder, licking me with her rough tongue.

"For fuck's sake," I tell her. "Cricket. C'mon. Leave it. No licking. Never lick me again. I swear."

I'm grumbling at her as I get to the HF and pick up the mic. I squeeze the transmit button, then let go. I nearly said something. Switching to the lock bay's external camera, I watch the supply ship pull away. *No she didn't*, I tell myself. *No she didn't. No she didn't. She wouldn't. She wouldn't.*

I try to talk myself down as I wait for the supply ship to get the hell into hyperspace. I try to picture some bald man with a beer gut over on that other beacon, scratching his neck, chewing on a protein pack. That's the truth. Hold on to that. Don't get your hopes up.

The supply ship ramps up its drive and vanishes from my screen.

I squeeze the mic.

"Beacon 1529? This is beacon 23. You read me? Over."

I wait.

There's no response.

I switch my scanner back to get a visual on the beacon.

The lifeboat is still there. Still attached.

"Go ahead."

The words are clipped. Came when I wasn't paying attention. But it was her. I'm pretty sure it was her. Pretty sure.

"Claire?" I ask.

"Go ahead," she answers.

I take a deep breath. I steady myself with one hand on the dash. Cricket is there, leaning against me. She puts her mouth on my arm and squeezes, threatening to bite me if I make the wrong move.

"I know," I tell Cricket. "We both do."

And I can't remember the last time I said the words and meant them like this. Can't remember the last time.

But I'll always remember this one.